Hadrian's Wall, 467

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Hadrian's Wall, 467

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Summary

"Make a promise," he suggests, and shifts a little, leans over Galahad from his waist, turning his body to settle his palms on either side of him. "Keep it. Then not everything is broken promises."

There is never just one lifetime, not for people who are meant to meet. In Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter's case, they shared five. Four which they could not share fully, and one which they did. This is their first.

Notes

This is the first in a 5-part AU series depicting the lifetimes Hannibal and Will had shared but never fully lived through, and one that they're still working on (canon). We will post every Sunday for the next six weeks.

This has been an ongoing project for a few months and we are very proud of it. Some of the lifetimes connect more than others, there are mentions and clues connecting to previous 'lives' or past ones and they do flow into one another, as slowly but surely they get closer and closer to this lifetime they share now.

They will be rated per story, some ranging to explicit for violence, while others for sex. We're just gonna assume that language isn't a factor ;)

Comments and critique is always welcome!

Arthur makes an effort to bring them their new terms before they are too drunk to properly accept them. It is perhaps poorly timed - they are not yet drunk enough to fully regret their need to ride in the morning, neither are they drunk enough for pliancy, bravery. None too far gone to fail to understand. One last mission, he tells the sad and ragged remains of his Sarmatian Legion - the very word meant 'many'. One last task for Rome, and you would be paid what you are already owed.

Tristan finds that the sudden uncertainty of tomorrow is nothing more sudden nor uncertain than his tomorrows had ever been. Soldier's life - a legionaire's life - was what he knew. What he remembered of his life before, that he hadn't replaced in his memory with sword grips or the origins of nicks and cuts in his skin or a thousand other lessons important for life, was small and gray and stationary. It was the sort of idyllic life men like him defended for those that craved it.

He did not begrudge his brothers their dream, perhaps they remembered more or better, but he had never much shared it. There was always in his mind the notion that he must live to get there, and always in his heart the suspicion that he did not want it badly enough to do so.

Tristan might have followed Arthur back to Rome, perhaps, or simply ridden on until he found no more paved roads to travel, and only then decided if he liked the taste of freedom or not. The concept of thirst and the relief of it were not always, Tristan found, the same. He accepts the change of course like flowing water, and his eyes follow the angry path that Lancelot takes, to follow Arthur, and he supposes others are not so ready to accept.

He finds Galahad curled and quiet, in one corner of the garrison. Where he is sitting there is nothing soft. He has a jug of the soldier's ration wine - they all save that for the ends of their nights when the thin, sour taste slides easier over well lubricated tongues and down their throats to join with the finer stock. It was the cheapest. It was what they were owed. Tristan crouches and claims the clay wordlessly from fingers that first tighten, then surrender rather than fight him on it. He drinks so that his brother in arms will not have to finish as much, but he leaves the last sips so that Galahad can whet his voice free.

"You must remember it well enough to miss it," Tristan observes. Galahad is the youngest of them - he had lied about his age to spare his mother losing her oldest son, after his father had died. Galahad had divulged once that he had only been seven when he joined. Tristan had accepted that the boy would be among the first to die - and yet here he was a survivor. Often, Galahad would speak of the home he'd left too early.

Tristan rarely did, and only when he had had enough wine to make the well watered sour soldier's draft worth drinking. His father had been a raiding Hun, by all accounts - his mother had surrendered him eagerly to the Romans. He has never felt as unlucky as he was told he would be by his clan, certainly not in battle. He settles himself next to his seated fellow, and waits for the words to come forth.

They don’t, for a long time. Just a sound of derision and a glare at the way Tristan had come. Aimed, in meaning if not actual intent, at Rome and all it stood for. Galahad has as much respect for Arthur as Arthur has for him and all of his men. There has rarely been a time he

had disliked the man, never has he hated him. Though he is the youngest, he's made his name well enough. He's an excellent bowman, and skilled with the blade to take his own victories form his brothers when they fought in play.

His age no longer matters to any of them. They have all been here fifteen years, suffered the same losses.

"I miss a time when honor was a code followed by all men, not just those who learned it in battle." He answers finally. His voice doesn't waver, but his has the thickness to suggest that alcohol weighs on it. he doesn't turn to the scout to look at him. of all the soldiers, Tristan was the one that made himself the most mysterious and the least understood. No one knew his story properly, and after a while, everyone stopped asking. That's not to say Galahad's attention wavered from him, he'd always found the man too interesting to ignore.

And infuriating beyond words every time he one-upped him on something, which was often. In jest, of course, but the point remained.

Tristan rarely responds in words - as he does not do so now, but he is listening. He has always had a steady way - and a tendency to surprising one. Whether it was materializing from between the trees silent and just next to one like a ghost or a thought. He does not judge, but his glance slides to Galahad for clarification. Such a time had not existed in his lifetime, or Arthur's - Rome does little but recall it's glory these days, even as they sit with their backs to Hadrian's wall.

"As Arthur misses the Rome he's built in his head so I miss a home that's built in mine." He shrugs, sniffing, before swallowing the rest of the cheap wine and setting the clay jar aside. "I remember my family. And I remember our hut. My brothers." He leans his head back against the wall and sighs. He's angry because yet another promise was broken to him. his brothers in arms, the fallen legionnaires, had promised him to stay alive, Rome had promised him freedom…

"Are our lives nothing but broken promises and blood?" he asks finally, rolling his head against the wall to watch Tristan carefully.

"Sometimes there is battle," He reminds. As if the Woads had let them forget. They have seen more of the world than most people dreamed even existed, sailed across oceans - Tristan does not bring that up, anyway, he doubts Galahad remembers much but retching over the side. It was easy to be angry now. "Build your dream a little bigger while you wait for it. Anyone who waits for us can wait a little longer."

He reaches out and clasps a hand over Galahad's shoulder, to give him a bit of a shake, partially in reassurance and partially to test how drunk he was. "Else, forget." He stands, and beckons Galahad to follow if he likes. He has better spirits than this in his quarters, for both implications of the word - there was light and pleasant spice and good wine and dice, if they cared to make a challenge of it.

But it was better than sitting out on the stone floor amidst the empty baskets where dried fruit had been stored and looking sorry for himself.

“I can’t forget.” It sounds almost petulant, but no longer disbelieving; it’s no new news that Tristan doesn’t miss home, that he doesn’t talk about or remember home. Regardless, he forces himself up to follow the man, not swaying so much as challenging balance to reacquaint itself with him.

He doesn’t know where the others are. Bors is most likely with his woman – rough as the man pretends to be he is a good father to his children, until Galahad started physically batting him off he was a good father figure to him too – Dagonet would be thinking, quiet and accepting somewhere no one can bother him. Gawain… Galahad doesn’t even want to think about Gawain, accepting on his behalf before he could get another word in. he supposes he’ll thank the man in the morning for saving him the humiliation.

Lancelot he doesn’t doubt is trying to talk sense into Arthur. Arthur, he doesn’t doubt, is calmly refusing it.

So he follows Tristan, because his only other option is to drink himself to sickness somewhere he won’t be found, he might as well do the same but with the company of someone he trusts. He supposes, perhaps, the alcohol will get Tristan talking more, maybe he can get more out of the man about his home and why he doesn’t care for it. or, if anything, Galahad will be able to get some sleep in familiar company; they will leave early the next morning.

Without looking back to confirm, Tristan leads the way. Honestly, he will not pressure the other - Tristan lays out offers, he does not coerce or cajole. There is something about how close he holds to himself that encourages others to take them, more often than not. In life as in battle, he tends not to deviate from a strategy that works.

He hesitates at his door, however, and glances back, just to discern how long he has to hold it open. Inside, he takes up a spare dry bit of paper, as Galahad slides past him in the door, chest to chest, and he leans back out to take fire from one of the lanterns in the yard to strike the wicks of the two lanterns within, and then a cone of incense - the air is dusty and disused within, they have been gone for some time before and only rarely spend time quartered anyway.

"It's only the Saxons," he suggests, mildly, as Galahad finds his way in the unfamiliar space - it is sparse, but not barren. Tristan has a habit of taking knives he finds interesting from those he has killed, not as trophies so much as out of the sense that one could really never have too many. So he digs two from beneath the wooden bed frame, tossing them carelessly back before he removes the promised wine. "It will be no worse than trying to convince the Romans of your rights with no paper to prove it."

“It’s only,” Galahad replies with a scoff, “You always say that like it’s nothing at all, Tristan,” he tells him, taking in the space. It’s undoubtedly Tristan’s, no one else had such an affinity to knives as the scout did. He’s surprised he doesn’t collect arrowheads anymore, he used to when he was younger.

“I don’t want to prove my rights to the Romans I know I have them.” He sits heavily on the bed and watches the man draw the clay container from under the bed in clear suggestion. He shakes his head. He doubts he needs more drink tonight, if he needs to be able to hold himself

on a horse the next morning. But perhaps if it's the two of them trying to hold their balance he'll find it far more bearable.

"Then leave your horse and armor and go home," Tristan suggests. "No one will stop you as a fleeing soldier." Tristan makes a single sound of laughter, and begins to settle on the edge of his bed before he gets up suddenly. Another knife is tossed carelessly toward the corner, and then he resettles. Galahad looked too young, and perhaps just Roman enough that no one would question him. Of course should it come to light that he was a deserter... with no papers to prove otherwise, and no consul to vouch... well it was as much a risk as this.

"Why do you not care?" Galahad asks, sitting back enough for there to be space for them both, the incense fills the space but not in a way that's invading, it's a soft smell, a subtle one, "Was your home so cruel to you that you do not wish to return to it?"

"Not cruel," Tristan answers. He unstoppers the wine, and scents it to be sure it has not gotten too hot sitting here in his absence and gone over to vinegar. He had chosen well in storing it, because his mouth turns up into half a grin and he takes a long sip. "Dull."

He arches his eyebrows. "What makes you assume I don't want to go back? I haven't died yet." Neither has Galahad. They are as likely to die on the journey back as they are on the journey tomorrow - the Woads are not the only worry the Romans face. "I intend to continue."

After another sip he passes the jug again, insistent - at least one sip to leave his mouth without the sour taste of the bad wine. "I have as much to go back to as you." It's either a lie or the truth, perhaps just as much of both as to be a typical statement from Tristan.

Galahad just snorts and accepts the wine, humming in appreciation at the flavor before licking his lips and passing it back. His brows are furrowed and raised but not in concern, merely disbelief.

"Intend to continue where?" he asks, "When we get the papers, I'm riding home. Lancelot to his, Dagonet and Gawain to their own. I hardly know what Bors will do, and Arthur will finally see his beloved Rome again. but your home, you claim, is dull. I've never known you to indulge in anything you find dull."

"Intend to continue living," Tristan corrects, working his mouth once to press his tongue over his teeth. But perhaps Galahad had the right of the interpretation. It's clear Tristan hadn't much thought about it. Little as he spoke, it seemed to be a product of instinct rather than an overabundance of thought. He was far from stupid, he just carried a sort of serenity that had always served him well. He might argue about Lancelot, that the man was only so angry because he had spent so long talking himself into the idea that he could leave Arthur's side, but Tristan doesn't. Instead, he looks over at Galahad.

He offers a narrow-eyed smile. "Will you perhaps follow one of us home?"

It's in jest, of course, but it can be played both ways. If Tristan indeed has no home to go to, he may find himself following one of them or another for the sheer familiarity of it all. Or

stay in the army and integrate into a new legion. But if he were to follow one of them, he would not be turned away. They both know it for a fact; they are brothers in all but blood.

"What would my beloved think?" He asks, as blandly as that. It's the first Galahad has heard of it. Tristan doesn't look as if he is joking - but he rarely looks as if he is involved in any situation. He could follow any of them, but what would he do with himself? "And yours."

Tristan was hardly cut out for farming - he wondered at times if any of them so intent on going home had really considered what it meant day-to-day. He has another long sip, long enough for several swallows, and seems pleased, warmed by the result. He sets the jug aside, and leans back. "Today, tomorrow, next week, next year. It will still be there. It doesn't wander."

Galahad laughs, a surprised easy sound, before taking up the wine again, emboldened by Tristan's liberal drink to have one of his own. He has never seen Tristan take a woman back to his rooms, from what he can tell, no one has. At least not for more than a night's entertainment, a brief respite from their lives. The only man among them who had a constant partner was Bors and he had children to show for it.

And unless the man had a girl enamoured when he had been 12 and taken away, Galahad highly doubts he has a woman now to return to, just as he himself has no one.

"I'm sure mine will grow used to having a stray." He offers finally, catching some drops of wine against the back of his wrist before putting the jug away as Tristan had attempted to. "Though I doubt it will be me you follow home."

The laughter earns a bland look - as if Tristan could sense the disbelief and he wanted to carry his story a bit further. Instead he lets it sit for now, seems to consider. "I doubt Bors would notice another mouth to feed." Dry as that. It won't happen. Tristan is as likely to disappear into the night scouting as settle down. There were sometimes whispers that it was a miracle he had not already - especially in the earliest days of the legion, when Tristan would be gone days at a time.

The wine is warm in Galahad's belly, giving his head the pleasant lightness that was the reason Galahad drank at all. He laughs again, slightly gentler, and rests back so his feet are over the edge of the bed but his body bent back over it. his head rests over the other side, arms spread loosely at his sides.

"I wish I had your mind, Tristan," he tells him, "With its ability to let things pass and not lament them."

Tristan turns his head, looks down at Galahad laying back on his bed and his hands folded in easy repose. The wine had helped, though he would lament it in the morning, they had long to ride before they need truly worry. Perhaps the Woads would take pity on their splitting heads and not feel the need to split them further.

For a while silence lingers, the scent drifts, the lights flicker and the night darkens. There is nothing to worry about here, but tomorrow there will be the concern that they were again so far from living through their fifteen years, as so many of them had not.

"Make a promise," he suggests, and shifts a little, leans over Galahad from his waist, turning his body to settle his palms on either side of him. "Keep it. Then not everything is broken promises."

The other just watches him, eyes slightly narrowed again. he doesn't know what promise he can make that he can keep. He has had far too many broken to attempt to make those same to another, but Tristan is looking at him with such intent as he rarely sees in the man unless he's reporting upon his return from a scout ahead.

Tristan is a strange man, an interesting one.

"What would you have me promise?" he asks instead, just blinking at him for the moment. As imposing as the stance was, it didn't feel dangerous coming from him. Galahad had fought with the man in practice, before they had all grown close as brothers, fought him for sheer spite. But even being pinned by him as he had been, this felt different.

"What could I possibly promise that I could keep?"

Tristan meets his eyes and measures him, in that way he has where his eyes seem to go depthless and both immediately present and long since gone. They are mostly hidden behind the unkempt fringe of hair and the shadows behind, but Galahad has seen the look often enough to know how to read it. "Find her for me," he says, and then clarifies without any specifics. "Isolde."

"Bring her this," he continues, and leans down to cover Galahad's mouth with his own. It's not quite a rough kiss, but it seems to quickly go past what Tristan had intended, from perhaps another game - another test or chance to challenge or even the unusual sort of comfort he occasionally saw fit to offer his brothers by simply being steady as he was into something that reveals that perhaps even he was anxious.

Underneath he is almost as uncertain and desperate as the others, but he has been instead for some time, with the understanding that the only family that had never doubted his luck or treated him as its bastard was soon to break apart and drift gently away, like ice at thaw.

Galahad makes a surprised sound but doesn't retaliate, finding himself not responding so much as accepting, letting his eyes close and his mind imagine where Tristan would have found her, this girl he was determined to give such a kiss to. He finds he's almost jealous.

When they break for air, Galahad gasps and blinks up at his friend. For a moment, neither speak, Tristan's eyes searching his, and Galahad trying to contain his desire to make a joke out of this. It wasn't the time, it would be wrong to. Though he does wonder if Tristan understands that if he keeps his word, he will have a very confused young woman to deal with. He doesn't let himself believe Tristan expects to die.

"You should kiss her like that yourself," he murmurs after a moment, "Teach Lancelot a thing or two, if he's there when you do."

He swallows and tilts his head slightly, still watching the man above him. his gaze doesn't falter, doesn't shift away, he's waiting for the promise, and Galahad realizes that perhaps this

is the first time Tristan has opened up, even a little, about his own particular fear of this being their last mission together, that it could be their last everything if they aren't careful.

"I promise." He says finally.

Tristan relents and sits back, returns to his former position on the bed. Perhaps Galahad didn't understand it yet, but it would give his mind something else to consider, and give him a promise to focus on keeping. It was enough of the intent that it would give him a hint.

He shifts down too, now that there is space between them again, and passes Galahad one of the disused pillows as he folds his own legs down off the edge of the bed. As if that was all there was to it and all they had to worry about was over.

The promise was made, which meant Galahad had to make it back at least, to take control of his own fate and change it. It's easier to sleep for all the alcohol, the room a peaceful, lazily spinning place. Sleep is a start, they will face the next morning when the sun rises.

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Winter settles quick in this part of the world. Even before the snow truly falls anywhere but the mountains, the entire country grows cold, the air grows lighter. Their horses move slow, either guiding the party before them or following up to keep them together. As Tristan had scoffed – and Arthur attempted to ignore him – they would not make it. Only so much can be said for Sarmatian knights, but they were not immortal. Seven against countless Saxons were not good odds.

Regardless they move forward, Tristan ahead more than he is within the group itself, seeking out safer passage, sending his bird farther than his horse could ride, speaking to it in his strange language that he hadn't dropped or forgotten in all the fifteen years they had been away from home before setting it to fly again.

Galahad rides at the back, with Gawain and Bors, Arthur and Lancelot head the party. It's quiet and cold. Colder, the higher into the mountains they get, and only when word comes from Tristan of ice ahead, do they stop for the night. The snow falls thicker and darkens the sky before its time. They stop to rest.

Dagonet has his hands full with the boy he had rescued, Lancelot and Arthur leave to discuss again, matters that they believe to be too fickle for the rest of the party to be privy to; at least for that Galahad can be thankful. Watching the two oldest of the party fight for fifteen years has become both a hobby as well as a much hated occurrence. And in the middle of the mountains, with armies circling, he has no time for such things.

They spread out and sleep around the camp to keep it safe, Galahad choosing the forest both out of spite – Gawain had claimed in jest that it would frighten him - and because it's farthest from the camp proper. He's a light sleeper, any sound will wake him if scouts choose the forest to ambush from. He settles in and wraps his cloak further around himself, shivering and staring into nothing at all.

He thinks again of his promise, on the girl Tristan has that none of them know about. Thinks, absently, that she will be lucky to get him back.

Tristan returns late, looking tired. He had seen Arthur and Lancelot arguing from afar, and decided his report - that all was clear so far and that they had gained enough time to sleep from the Saxon's pause to burn what lay behind them, at least for now - that the advance scouts would reach them tomorrow, but they could not expect the women and children and animals to march through the night. Exhaustion would rob them of their advantage, and not give them enough advance.

So the scout that comes upon Galahad, carrying a second heavy bearskin in which he had ridden, is not the enemy as he had expected to find out here, perhaps. "Mother and Father are arguing," Tristan informs him, his breath a warm fog, with the skin hiked up his neck tightly. Their armor was little help. He has ridden late, past supper, but he has found something to eat in the stores and lightened them unseen. He settles down beside Galahad.

"This is too exposed," he advises, slinging his bearskin over both of them without asking - Galahad's ears were pale white and threatening blue, his lips close behind. Tristan offers olives that are oiled and salted- and miraculously not frozen. "You'd have done better to go up the tree."

Galahad just laughs, taking the offering without comment, feeling himself shift closer to the man under the bearskin almost without conscious thought.

“And then never live another day without you bringing up how I fell from it in sleep? Unlikely.” His voice is stuttered with cold but coherent. He allows himself a few moments of shivering before accepting the olives with a grateful hum, more so that Tristan doesn’t freeze his hands holding them out to him than because he truly wants them. His waterskin is running close to empty and the salt wouldn’t help his thirst. Though, he supposes, he could suck on ice if he was truly desperate.

“Gawain was too scared to take the forest watch, so I saved him the humiliation of admitting it.” he offers finally, still pressed close but the shivering now subsided somewhat. Again they are quiet, listening to the sounds of the camp behind them, the forest in front. Far away, carried only by the wind, they can hear the faint beat of drums, like a heartbeat. Galahad swallows and ducks his head further into his own cloak.

He does not admit his own fear.

With two heavy skins over them and the warmth of both their bodies as they sit, shoulder to shoulder, it does not take long for Galahad's trembling to slow. Tristan chews slowly, not particularly thrilled with the notion of so simple a dinner, either, but he knows better than to let his energy flag because he was too picky.

"You should have spread yourself out," Tristan says, and he spits a pit far into the snow. "Then your frozen limbs might have tripped enemy scouts."

But he is mostly teasing. There are some who might not stand up in the morning, but Galahad was no stranger to this land - if he had gotten much colder, perhaps his pride might have

stung, but he'd still have gone back to the fires to warm himself. With two, they can manage.

"What is there to be afraid of in the woods?" Tristan asks, with an upward glance. He has never feared the shadowy spaces between trees. "The Saxons stopped to burn the village, and their scouts won't catch us until tomorrow."

He does not need to reiterate that they will be caught tomorrow. If they could perhaps bottleneck the Saxons in a pass... they had divided themselves already, with one force already turning for the wall. The chance was small, but there. That had always been enough for Tristan. The drums are distant, but not faded, and they will grow closer. "They can march, we'll sleep."

As if it were that easy.

Galahad doesn't answer him, old enough now to know that fearing the dark was both childish and not, at once. There was little to fear in woods that they knew, behind the wall, near their camps, but in these, anything could come from the dark. Nor does he comment on the fact that Tristan does not soften the fact that they will be caught tomorrow.

This could, in essence, be the last night any of them lived through. He doubts he can sleep.

"Is there anything you fear, Tristan?" he asks him, when the silence falls heavy around them like the snow and the warmth between them gets comfortable, almost as though they're watching the forest through a window. Behind them, the camp has quietened. The child Dagonet cares for whimpers with fever, nearby someone makes their way quietly and carefully through the brush and to the clearing beyond. Tristan seems to pay it no mind, so Galahad doesn't either.

Even the Woads didn't dare these places - too high and too cold. With the snow threatening to fall again in the night, Tristan would rather have taken to speed. But the need to save all, rather than the few, slows them down to the pace of the wagons. Arthur will not be swayed, Tristan does not try.

"Little that I have not already met," he says, but it's not much of an answer. It's not satisfying. Tristan eats another olive, spits the pit, and then the last in his hand, before he withdraws it under the skins. When he continues it's with humor. "Boredom. Dying old and alone in bed."

He glances sidelong at Galahad and finds the look he is getting isn't truly appreciative of his attempts. Tristan shoves his still freezing fingers up the back of Galahad's tunic to warm them on his skin. "Frostbite."

He doesn't quite squeak but it's a close thing. Galahad finds himself, instead, wriggling out from under the bear skin to avoid the cold touch, the night air hitting him hard when his main source of warmth is taken away. He curses quietly, glares at the scout who is far more amused by the turn of events than he should be. He steels himself, carefully gathering snow into the palm of his hand behind him where Tristan can't see, before crawling back when the cold gets too much.

“You do not fear retribution?” he asks, expression still indignant, but his eyes smiling. He waits for the man to smile, that self-satisfied grin he wears when he tosses a knife that lands in perfect center of the target, or at the end of Galahad’s to show the man up, waits for him to begin his answer before pressing the handful of snow against his neck, shoving it as far under the man’s collar as he can reach before he retaliates.

And then he’s grinning, dark forest forgotten, drumbeats matching his heart as it levels out, preparing for a game or a fight. They need sleep, certainly, but neither will get it if they think as much as they are.

He shifts back and gathers another handful of snow, two handfuls, actually, that he presses together and shapes, tilting his head at Tristan in challenge.

Tristan does not quite roar at the handful of snow down his front, on his feet quickly enough to dislodge the furs - carefully onto the oiled cloth that Galahad had laid over the ground below. They will need the furs later, but for now, Tristan accepts the challenge, leaps to his feet and makes grabs for the snow as well, moving as he does, to tuck himself into the trees and retaliate from cover.

It does not stop Galahad from landing another on his shoulder - he had been well enough taught to hit his target by now, but Tristan can return the favor. He takes cover behind a deadfall, and Galahad has the smaller target, and must fight his way exposed.

Tristan hits him with nearly five snowballs before he peers back over the top of the log and finds no sign of the man. He wonders if perhaps he has gone too far in play, and begins to stand up when Galahad impacts him, sidelong, and drives him down laughing into the snow. He loses his breath, briefly, but grapples through the sensation, trying to claw up handfuls of snow, before he discovers he has depleted much of it and instead settles his hands at Galahad's middle and flips them into a fresh patch.

"Yield," he suggests, as they both try to get handfuls together into weapons.

Without his hands busy pinning Tristan in turn, Galahad gathers more snow, grateful for the new supply, and lands a clean blow directly to the man’s mouth, no higher. Even in play, a man’s eyes were too precious to aim at, especially a scout. He has perhaps a second to savor his victory before he gets the same, closing his eyes tight as he spits the freezing stuff from his face and shakes it off.

It’s stupid, a childish game, but once they’ve started neither are willing to stop. They grapple until that patch of snow, too, is depleted and again Galahad finds himself pinned. He’s breathless and happy, and shaking his head at Tristan.

“I won’t yield,” he pants, “Until you do.” As with everything. As with training, when he had been the smallest and finding it difficult to raise a sword, when he had found it hard to pull back the bowstring enough to loose an arrow, had crawled out to practice at night until he could out-shoot both Gawain and Tristan the next time they stepped up.

He has grown used to being the smallest, considered the weakest, but the most resilient. The most likely to keep falling, over and over and over again until he got a foothold hard enough

to flip his opponent to the ground.

They have never trivialized childish games or the need for them. But they will soon be thoroughly wet and freezing, and as it is it's only the motion keeping them warm. Tristan reverses them again, changes the pin to let Galahad have it, and lets himself lay slack in the snow, their hands at each other's wrists.

"I yield," he allows, though he has somewhat ruined the victory, he can feel the onset of shivers threatening both of them, and because this brings them in closer proximity, in good spirits, it ends before the game ceases to be fun. It continues in tradition. "My value or my service, Galahad?"

The wager - it had never needed to be spoken - traditionally ended the vanquished legionnaire surrendering what small coin they usually carried, or more often being stuck upon a dare. It was usually humiliating, but it kept things civil in its own way. Everyone - even Arthur - had lost at one time or another. Their brothers understood.

The younger grins, for a moment keeping Tristan where he is, before the wind slides over his back in clear indication of how little time they had before this turned from amusing to dangerous. Then he lets him up, standing before offering his hand.

“Your company,” he decides, “And two secrets.”

They are too far out, on a straight forward mission. Neither have coin. The drums beat too close for a dare, and everyone is too high strung to endure their foolishness with as much patience as they normally would. Company demanded only that the man share the fur and keep them both warm for the night. And secrets were hard to come by in a legion that claimed to have none from their own. But everyone had secrets, and Tristan especially was a goldmine for them. If not his own, then those he’d found and kept – he was a scout by nature as well as position.

He narrows his eyes when Tristan grins, satisfied with his easy penalty, and adds another.

“And a reminder of what it is I promised to give Isolde.”

"In that order," Tristan agrees, and he pushes at Galahad's shoulders until the other eases off, and does his best to shake the worst of the snow out of his cuirass, and from up the cuffs of his breeks where it has snuck. It won't do much good, the clothes are wet. He works the fastenings of his cuirass at his sides, and pulls it up over his head as they head back to the furs, surrenders his boots next so he can properly encourage circulation back into his toes.

"Strip off what's wet," he instructs, as if it were as simple as survival. In a way it is, but Tristan's eyes had flashed when he'd been further challenged to relay his message again. However, he doesn't hesitate to follow his own orders, down as close to the skin as he dares, putting his clothes up to dry out of the windbreaks. Perhaps they would freeze in the night, in which case it would be a long walk to the horse lines to fetch his spare clothes, but certainly not the oddest thing his brothers had seen him do.

When they are settled beneath the furs, he works his hands over his feet, keeping in motion, pressed closer side-to-side with Galahad of necessity this time. His hair is soaked with melting snow, hanging sodden down his neck and ignored over his eyes. "Secrets," he prompts after a moment, when he's sure he can speak without stuttering.

When it comes to survival, Galahad takes no man's word quite how he takes Tristan's. They've been through enough winters for him to know that skin to skin contact is far more effective than bundling up and trying to seep warmth into their cold leathers and wool. He doubts the man will reveal much about the evening to their brothers, for which he's grateful. He hums at the request for clarification and thinks.

"One you own and one you found," he says finally, curling into himself a little more under the fur, feeling his extremities slip into pins and needles before starting to warm further.

"You saw where they stored our release papers that night," he starts, "Why didn't you take them?"

Tristan has spent enough nights on the edge of alive, cold and with no one but his horse to huddle against - and his brothers would have had enough to laugh at there, if they had ever seen. But he only avoided returning to camp when he needed to range more than a day away, when he was so far ahead and certain there was no danger that he could allow the rest. He reaches out and gets Galahad's hands between his own and chafes them back to warmth. They were lucky in that they had not let themselves get utterly soaked to the skin - or perhaps smart.

"It was Arthur who would have paid the price," he answers. "And he would have ridden to this alone. Perhaps with Lancelot."

It was better that they should all face this together. Arthur had never stood them against death alone, and much as the men hated this danger, he is certain that if Arthur had come alone and died... they would never have found a moment of happiness. But this was as much a secret he owned as one he had found. "I'm not ready to face the tail ends of our horses all riding in different directions."

Galahad almost feels like himself now, his body no longer wracked by shivers. The man next to him similarly doing better, even as his voice dips lower to keep just above a whisper but quiet enough to not be heard. Then he sighs, swallows lightly, and considers his next question, giving the request that will follow it.

"Why have you never spoken of Isolde until the day you made me promise?"

Tristan could almost laugh, but he sinks down into bright eyed seriousness instead. "Some things you hold close," he answers. "Memories are fine to revisit, but ideals... With ears like Lancelot's around, it's unwise." Beneath the blankets he shifts closer, hushes his tone as he paints a picture. "Dark hair, eyes the color of a sky in summer, kind and patient enough to wait."

He sits back, leans into the tree that hangs their clothes in limp attesting above them like bizarre fruit. "Because I don't deserve her." And who would, that wouldn't rush to return to

her? The point that Tristan is making, he suspects, goes by unnoticed. Galahad's eyes drift off, as if he were trying to picture the woman, trying to sort it out as a purely physical thing without the idea that Tristan is speaking in concepts.

Tristan waits until Galahad looks perhaps the most distracted, and then curls his rough fingers beneath the man's chin and turns his head until he can repeat the message - closer this time, pulling Galahad along with him until they are nearly flat beneath the furs, this time with Galahad settled over and Tristan's fingers curled against the man's neck to stretch them both into it.

He seems to go easier, this time, than the last. Perhaps because there is no alcohol to act as a barrier, perhaps because Galahad is anticipating the kiss, but when he moves he moves into the shift and not against it, bringing his hands down to rest against Tristan’s shoulders for balance.

It’s slower, a deeper thing than the first time. Less a reminder and more an amendment. Galahad would be a liar if he claimed he didn’t enjoy it – his body would speak the truth for him regardless. When he pulls away he has his eyes closed, teeth worrying his lips as he catches his breath through quick huffs of air through his nose.

“You must really love her.” he says quietly. it feels strange to be acting as a proxy, especially as they are, but he finds he doesn’t want to move, content to stay as he is, pressed close and warm for as long as the night gives them shelter.

Tristan has curled his fingers tight at Galahad's shoulders, pulled them close together so he could feel the other's breath grow quicker, feel every other response, but before passion deepens, just as Tristan begins to shift his hands down Galahad's shoulders to pull him close in earnest the other pulls away.

Huffing a laugh, Tristan lets him go. Galahad does not understand - he needs more time to think, perhaps. Tristan doesn't mind not rushing him - not here, not where it was so cold and quiet. "I must," he agrees, cryptic. He shifts the furs over them, so they can lay down back to back and comfortable, sharing warmth and companionship, and tired. Expended.

Perhaps in the morning, Galahad's thoughts will clear. Perhaps tomorrow evening. Today, tomorrow, next week, in a year. It will still be there. It doesn't wander.

-

It’s their horses that stop them. Far enough from the impending battle to not hear it but apparently close enough to smell the smoke. It’s familiar to them, dangerous, and they paw at the earth in discontent. So they return, reluctant all, but feeling like they somehow belong nowhere else but here.

It’s when they’re changing into their armor that Tristan pulls Galahad aside and reminds him of his promise to him.

There is disbelief, more than anger, but it boils up in Galahad’s throat as another potentially broken promise, something he can’t let choke him, and he acquiesces. He fights it, pushes the

man away in anger before mounting his horse and coaxing it out the back gates and away from the battle proper, his voice giving his horse speed as surely as his heels against its flanks.

He does not see the battle, nor the aftermath.

He finds himself riding until his horse tires, resting, then continuing on, keeping the sunset to his left until he reaches the place Tristan claimed was his home. He finds nothing. No evidence of pillage or invasion, simply nothing there at all. He rests on his steed and laughs, the sound bitter and pained. He doesn't stop there for the night. Doesn't attempt to track the nomads to their new home. It doesn't matter. He doubts he'll find Isolde, he doubts she ever was.

It takes less time – or so it seems – to return home. The home he's known for fifteen years, not the home he'd dreamed about and waited for. It doesn't surprise him that he ventures here first. Surprises him even less that he finds no one.

So he walks his horse to the graveyard, to the field of swords on the hill overlooking what once was their village. He finds no new ones erected, but the aftermath of the battle is still too near, there is time for that. He rests, head in his hands, and waits. He doesn't know what for. Perhaps for the swords of his brothers to appear around him, perhaps for his brothers themselves. He hears the shrill cry of Tristan's bird above them and looks up sharply, expecting its master nearby, but instead finds someone else.

"Arthur's gone off with the Woad woman," the voice comes gruff, harsh but warm. Bors settles the child he carries down on the ground and the boy runs to hoist himself on Galahad's shoulders as he sits, small hands clinging at the back of his neck. "Don't know what you came back for, everyone else's rode out."

He is carrying a bottle of beer, stoppered, he places it next to a small array at the point where Dagonet's sword touches the earth, one for every day. "We'll go soon, too. Saxon's are gone but so is Rome. Arthur can forget how many Woads he's killed, how many of us they've killed, but I won't. Land's land, and this place is too cold to bother with."

He pats Galahad on the shoulder once. "Come along with us, brother. We won't go all the way to Rome, but far enough to get you there, if that's what you want. If it's not, there's nothing here to stay for."

Soft, small hands cover Galahad's ears for a long moment, in a child's prank, and his eyes when he frees his ears to sound, and Bors' whistle comes low to make him look up quickly enough to see again, the boy giggling and letting him go. At the edge of the field a gray charger in disarray grazes, armor askew and loose - she is too exhausted to fight it anymore. "She turned up again. Surprise that - smart she remembered home even in all that armor. Better catch her if she hasn't lamed herself."

Galahad just stares, watches the horse pick her way through the thin grass. That alone speaks volumes on what Bors has left unsaid about the battle. He has mentioned Arthur but not Lancelot, nor Gawain. Tristan's horse and his bird wandered aimlessly through their old home but no one called them close.

He wonders of Bors will share his beer with him.

“There are no swords for them,” he says quietly, watching the horse still, not moving to approach her just yet, it’s a long walk and he has questions still. He glances back and watches Bors’ son run between the graves, touching the swords in a game to see how quickly he can do it. It’s Gilly, he thinks, but he could be wrong. There are eleven of them and they all look so similar.

He stands up slowly and walks closer to Dagonet’s grave, touching the sword lightly in greeting before looking at Bors again.

“Did you not find them?”

"Arthur burnt them to clean bones, and sent them back to Rome as heroes in Gawain's escort," Bors growls, as if it weren't right to separate their brothers. "I couldn't get all the kids ready in time. He'd have sent you too, but no one knew what became of you, and there was no one to send to scout."

He pats Galahad on the shoulder. "You've served, boy. Go back to Rome and spit on them, just to see how they wet themselves when they discover they no longer have Arthur, and then go start a legion of your own - fat happy children."

Bors reaches out and settles his arm around Galahad's neck. "In the morning. Come to dinner with us, lad, you'll always be welcome. We can stack the two smallest ones to make you space." He winks to show he isn't entirely kidding, and when his son comes running back, Bors hoists him, and starts moving back for the wall.

So Gawain lived. The flame of hope for Tristan glowed briefly before it faded. No scout to send. He lets out a breath and nods, though unsure of what exactly it is he’s agreeing to. Bors is far enough away for Galahad to raise his voice to a yell before he manages to ask.

“What became of Isolde?” he has to know, he can’t have his last promise be a broken one. “He sent me to find Isolde. Tristan did. But –“ there was no one. Just remains of fires and some rubbish left behind by the people before they moved on. He had given up his search so easily, determined to return to Tristan and have the man show him the way if he was so damned adamant.

Instead he’d found this. Nothing. Not even a sword to hold onto to remember him.

He could go to Rome, would, if it meant paying his respects to Lancelot and Tristan, but he would not stay there. It would anger him enough to do something foolish, and no one was left to hold him back, to convince him calmly to think and wait and plan instead.

"Isolde?" Bors laughs, briefly, gritty, as Galahad describes the task given. "Well," he draws the word out into a gravelly sound, as if debating whether or not to tell the man. "You can catch her now."

Bors gestures toward the grazing gray, standing amongst the good grass just down the hill from the cemetery. Then he glances up. "Or maybe it was the bird. Or both. One was never

all that certain with Tristan."

When Galahad stood trying to sort it, Bors gave him a solid thump. "Go on, get her. I'm sure he meant something, but gods know what. Dinner when you're ready." He chuckles again as he turns away, heading down toward the wall.

Galahad barely hears him, turns back to watch the mare graze, the armor barely clinging to her by the straps and saddle now. He doesn't follow Bors back to the wall, he doesn't move much at all, just resting near Dagonet's grave and thinking, trying to make sense of it.

Through all their jest, Tristan never thought Galahad a fool, so why this? Why make him seek out a person who does not exist for him? Why take him from battle and send him on a fool's errand? To save his life, perhaps, but there had been no guarantee that Galahad would die that day, just as there had been no promise of them all living. But still he had sent him away, him, no one else, to fulfil a promise he knew Galahad wouldn't break.

To find his beloved, with dark hair and eyes the color of a sky in summer.

Galahad closes his own, rubs them, and stands straighter.

When he leads his horse down the slope, with practiced care, he lets it loose to come to Tristan's steed alone, give her something familiar to follow for when he calls his own horse back. He takes his time removing the armor, setting it by the wall where he doubts anyone will care to look for it. he leads them both to the stables and tends to them, there is hay enough for them to eat even amongst the burned remains of the structure. He seeks out clean water too before sitting with his back against the wall watching the two animals feed.

He'd kept his promise, twisted as the words had been, foolish as he'd been to misunderstand them. He thinks back to the forest, to the secrets and the kiss. To how he'd wanted them to be for him and not for another, but he hadn't said anything. Just as Tristan hadn't clarified. They were both stupid, both doomed to be.

He just wishes he'd had the presence of mind to ask Tristan to keep a promise of his own.

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